SAILING FROM CROATIA TO THE CARIBBEAN: Part 2 MALLORCA TO MADEIRA

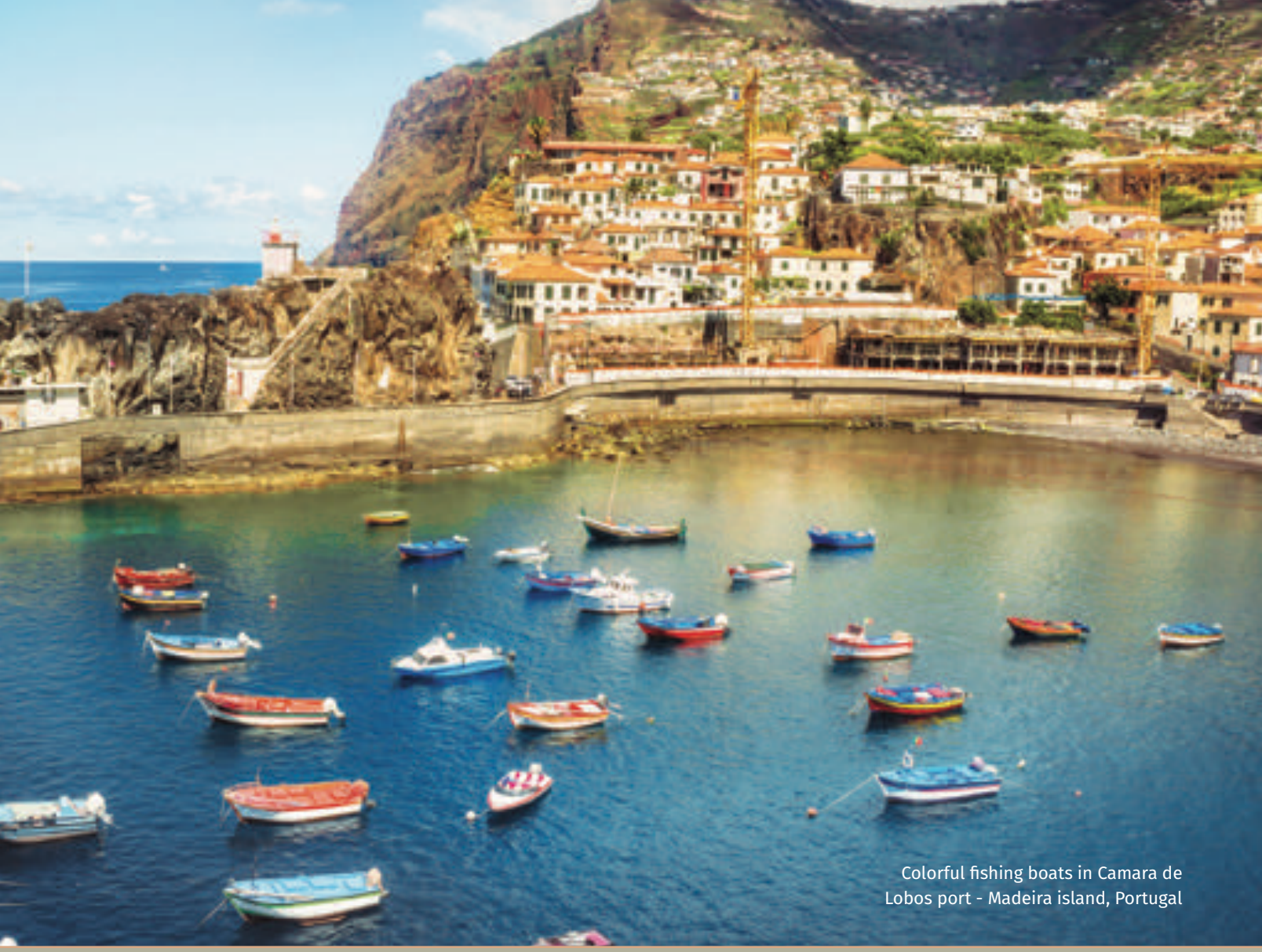
By Rob McLean

In Part 1 we shared the adventures of five unlikely shipmates sailing from Split, Croatia to Palma, Mallorca. This was the first leg of a unique sailing expedition organized by Barefoot Offshore Sailing School. This trip was in part delivery of a catamaran to St. Vincent and the Grenadines in the southern Caribbean, and in part an opportunity to learn the knowledge and skills required for certification as an offshore sailor, and in part a chance to experience cruising in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. Part 2 takes us on S/V BlueRay from Mallorca to Maderia.

Provisioning in Mallorca was easier than in Croatia. The alphabet was more familiar so ingredient names were recognizable, and less math was needed to mentally compare Euros to dollars versus the Croatian kuna. This also made it easy to recognize that prices were generally higher than in Split. In both places, the vast majority of brand names are unfamiliar to a North American shopper, which suggests that the global reach of major food corporations is still limited, which is a good thing. The huge variety of cured meats and cheeses in particular is almost overwhelming.

With John, Monica, Chad, and me on board, BlueRay departed Palma on November 5, 2022. Our first target was Cabo de la Nao, 120 miles to the south-west on the Spanish mainland, but directly upwind. The 10 knot breeze was not strong enough to power us through the lumpy seas left over from a gale that passed through the previous day, so we elected to proceed under engine, angling the boat just enough to starboard or port to avoid hobby horsing directly into the waves.

As we passed Ibiza the headwinds increased to 20 knots, kicking up one meter waves. As night fell we continued motoring, heading deep into the Bay of Posidonia to gain a lee from the offshore wind and



Colorful fishing boats in Camara de Lobos port - Madeira island, Portugal

reduce the fetch of the waves. This eased the motion of the boat, and enabled us to increase speed, while dodging multiple aquaculture operations in the Bay.

In the afternoon of November 6, we stopped in Alicante to refuel. Alicante has become globally famous as the headquarters of the Ocean Race, formerly the Volvo Ocean Race, that electrifies ocean racing fans every four years as teams of sailors drive 60 foot dinghy-shaped hulls around the world. Sure enough, as we entered the harbor, a veteran ocean racing boat sat in its cradle on the breakwater waiting for its next opportunity to compete for glory.

Night fell after leaving Alicante, and the wind died to almost nothing. With an almost full moon bathing the Spanish coastline, it was one of those magical nights at sea. I was on watch as dawn's early light revealed pairs of massive rocky outcrops thousands of feet high, framing a distant city skyline. As we got closer, it became evident that what looked like a typical city sky-line had no commercial buildings: these were high-rise vacation condos of the various "costas" along the Spanish Mediterranean coast. In general, the coastline leading to Gibraltar was a complete surprise: stunning architecture alternating with amazing rock-scapes.

We arrived in Gibraltar around noon on November 7, after another night of motoring with light winds and a full moon. The Rock is as impressive as one would expect. What we didn't expect was scores of ocean tankers anchored in Algeciras Bay, unloading their cargo into smaller coastal tankers. As a community, Gibraltar offers a strange combination of military security, tourist traps, and pubs providing familiar pastimes to thousands of British pensioners seeking a warmer climate and lower living costs than can be found in their former UK homes. Brexit complicated their lives,

but a way has now been found to enable Gibraltar to be part of the Schengen area, which simplifies travel and trade with Europe.

Our home for the night in Gibraltar was Queensway Quay Marina, which handled immigration and customs formalities efficiently. While some of the crew did a lightning tour of Gibraltar attractions, others serviced the engines for the rigors of the Atlantic. After a night out we checked out of the marina, headed to the refueling station, and departed Gibraltar at 1000 to catch a favorable tide.

Traversing the Gibraltar Straits presents four challenges: currents, traffic, security, and Orcas.

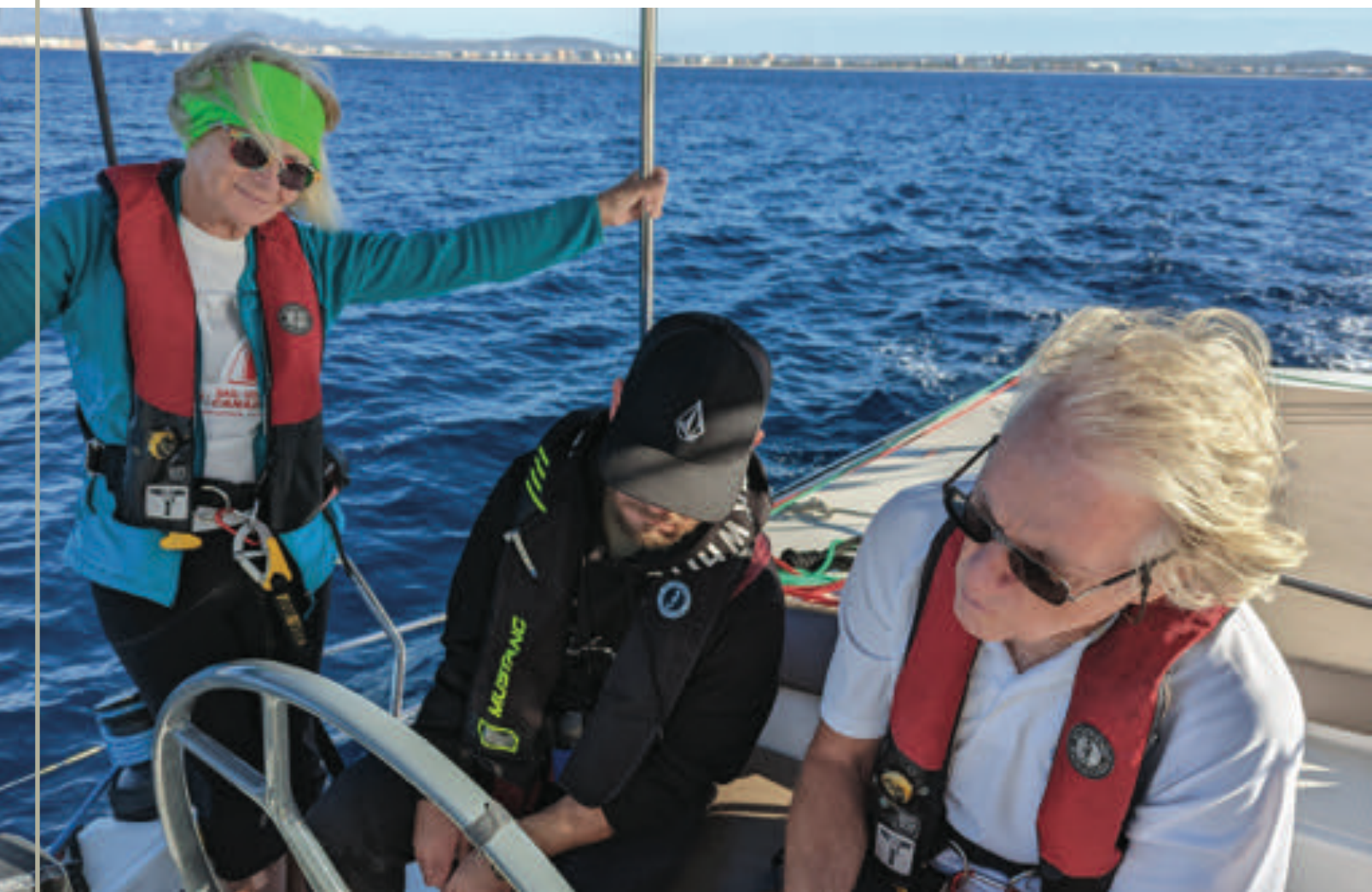
The first challenge has existed ever since sailors ventured out of the Mediterranean. In general, there is a 1-2 knot inflow into the Mediterranean, to replace the water lost to evaporation along the African coasts. Tidal currents of around 2 knots offset or reinforce this inflow, resulting in tide rips. When strong winds blow into or out of the Mediterranean, wind against tide can generate large, short, breaking waves.

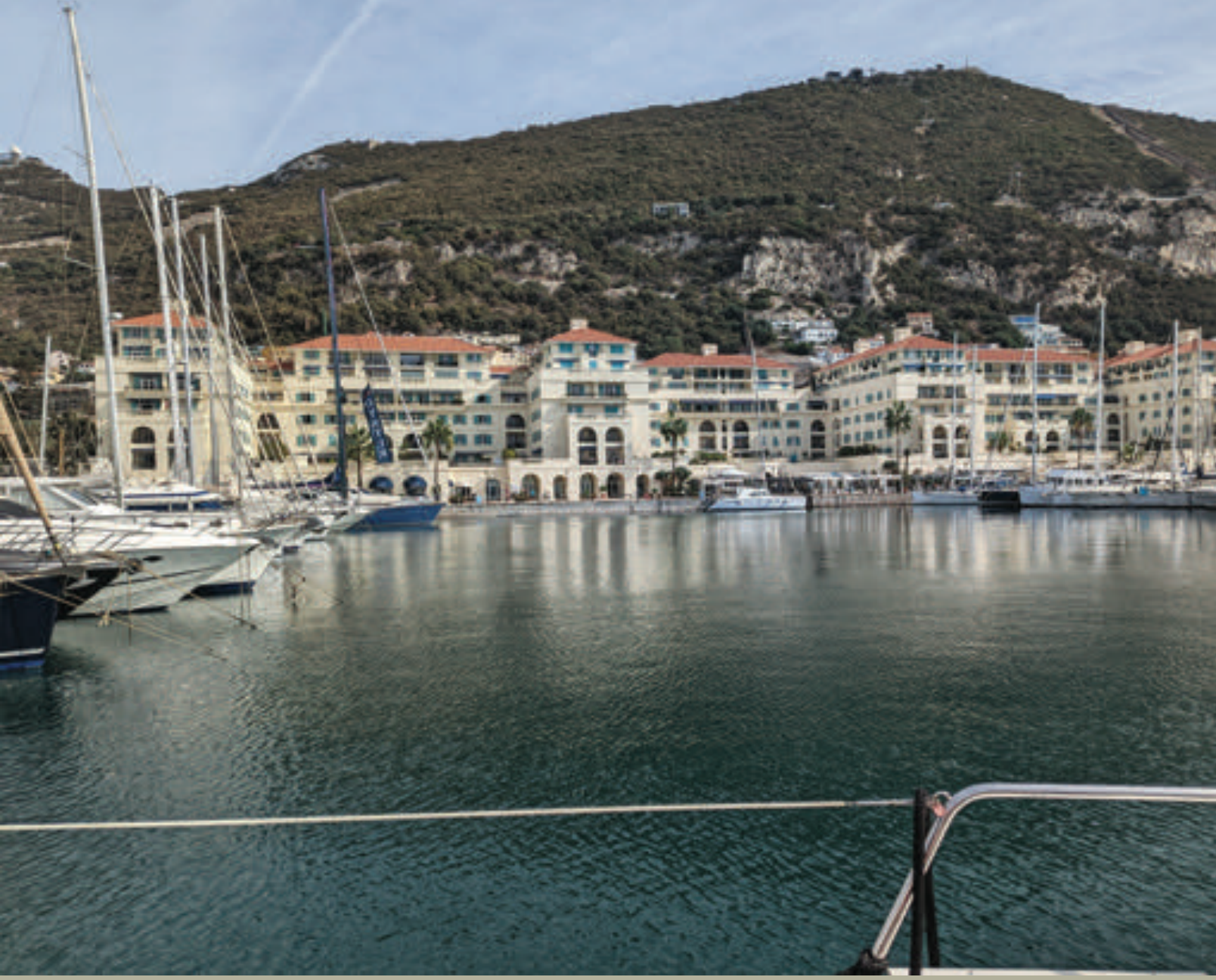
Fortunately, in our case the winds were gentle and we were able to time our departure so that the tidal current largely offset the inflow into the Med. We did encounter some tide rips as we crossed over to the Morocco side, but nothing hazardous to a modern 41-foot cat.

The second challenge, traffic, is a more modern phenomenon. A constant stream of commercial ships moves into and out of the Mediterranean. There is a clear traffic separation scheme, and freighter traffic is controlled to maintain a separation of about a mile between ships traveling in the same direction. At 10 knots, however, a freighter covers a mile in 6 minutes!

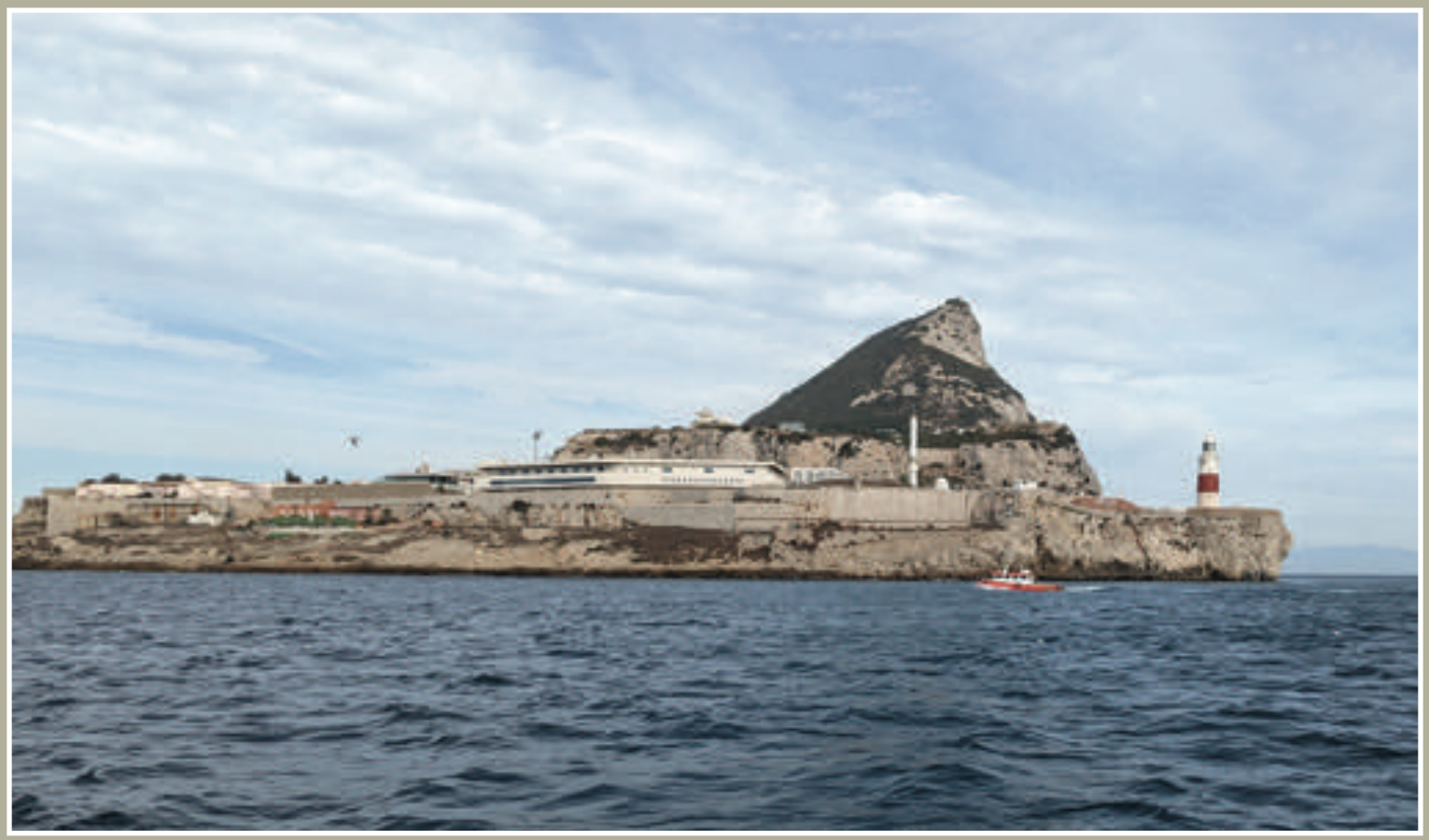
As we left Gibraltar we stayed fairly close to the northern shore until we passed Tarifa, after which the Strait starts to open up. However, at some point we needed to cross over to the Morocco side. When a suitable gap in traffic appeared, we seized the moment and powered across the traffic separation scheme.

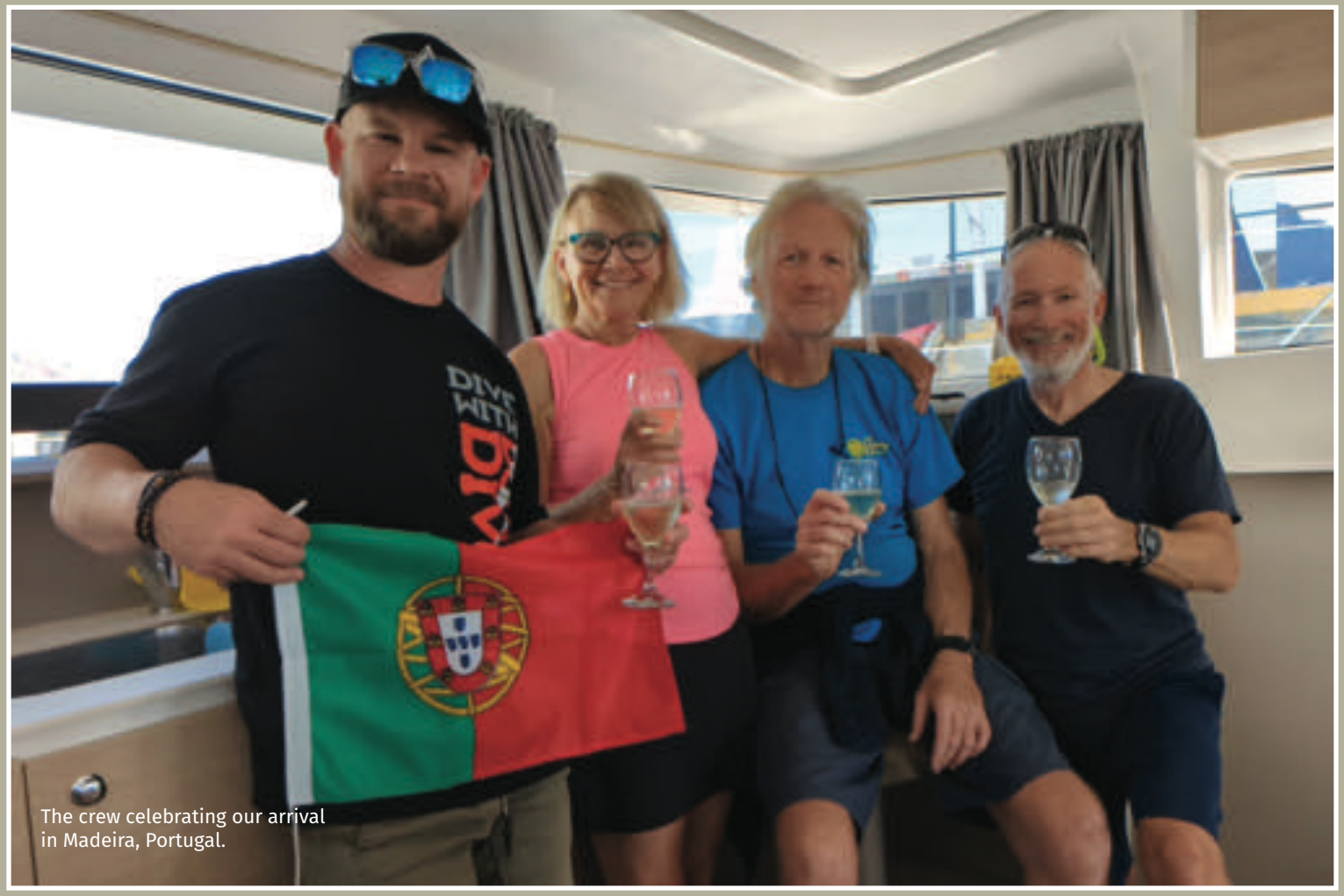
The third challenge, security, is also immemorial, as piracy has been a way of life on these coasts for centuries. Readers of Joshua Slocum's Sailing Alone Around the World will recall that after leaving Gibraltar he narrowly escaped an encounter with pirates and changed his plans, heading for Brazil instead of Suez. In our case, we were not overly concerned as long as we were within radio range of coastal authorities. We kept about 4 miles off the Morocco coast until we could set a direct course for Madeira.



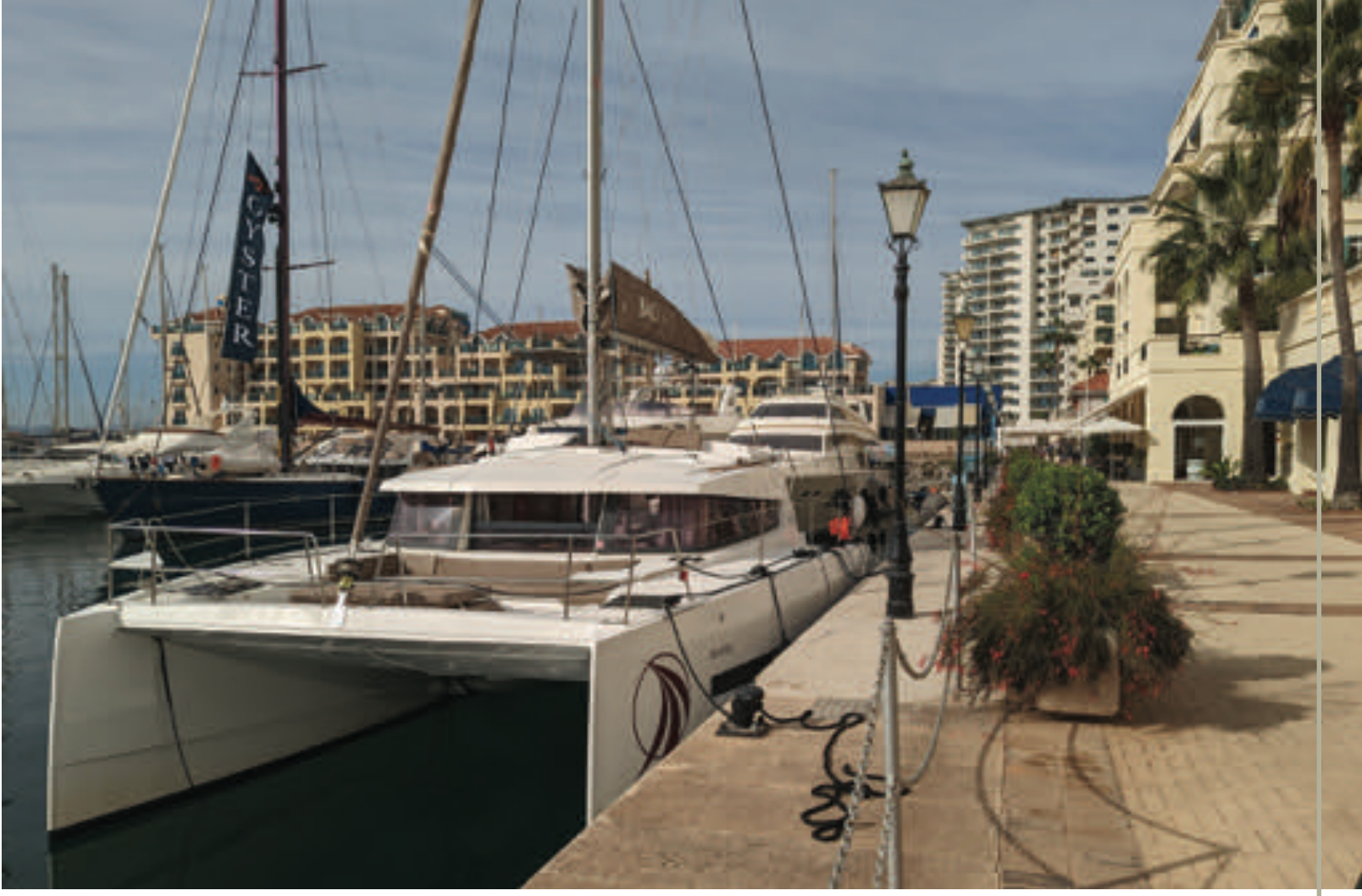


Freeing the sea turtle from the fishing net that was wrapped around our props.





The crew celebrating our arrival in Madeira, Portugal.



The fourth Gibraltar Strait challenge, Orcas, has been a factor only for a few years. Beginning in the summer of 2020, mariners started reporting that gangs of teen-aged Orcas were attacking and in some cases destroying the rudders of sail and power boats. In the last 2 years, over 500 Orca boat interactions have been reported in the Atlantic coastal regions ranging from the Gibraltar Straits to the Bay of Biscay. This range represents the seasonal migratory path of the Orcas that roam along the coastlines of France, Spain and Portugal as they follow the fish they feed on. A significant number of boats have been damaged to the point that they had to be towed into nearby ports for repairs.

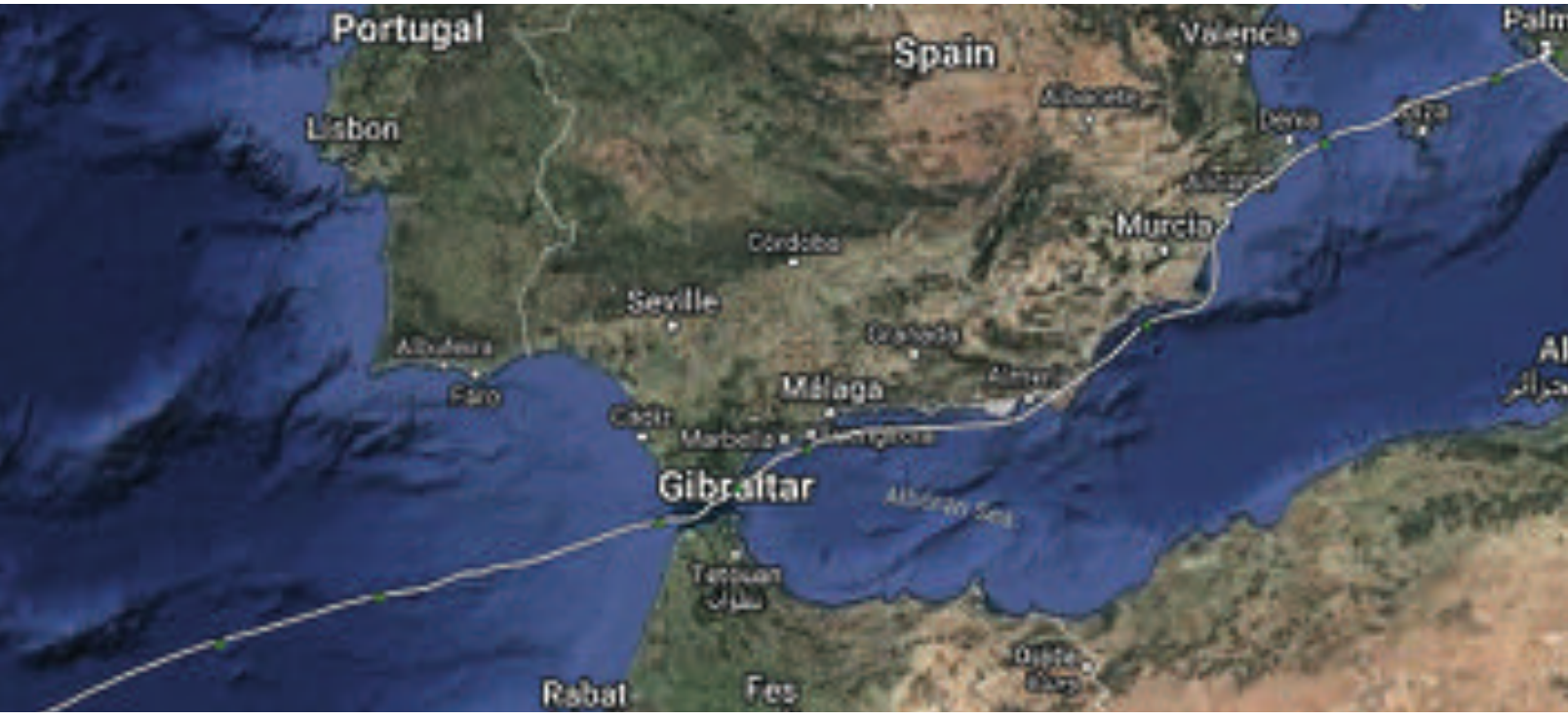
There is so far no good explanation of why Orcas in this area started exhibiting this behavior. One theory is that some Orcas were injured by a fishing boat propeller, and their friends are taking revenge. Since the Orcas involved in many interactions have been identified as adolescents, another theory is that they are bored teenagers out looking for cheap thrills. One wishes that the science of cetacean communication was advanced enough that we could have a conversation and solve the issue. In the meantime, it is concerning that more and more Orcas, in more diverse locations, are exhibiting this behavior.

Fortunately for us, based on the interactions database hosted by a group of European scientists (https://www.orcaiberica.org/en/interacciones-registradas), we concluded that by November it was likely that the Orcas would have relocated north toward the Bay of Biscay. So we were not overly concerned about an Orca interaction, but we did keep a lookout for dorsal fins until we were well on our way to Madeira.

Our passage to Madeira was noteworthy for two reasons.

The first was the wind: there was none. Nada. A weather disturbance over the Azores had pushed the Azores high south into the region that we were in, blocking the incipient trade winds that would normally have pushed us to Madeira. Consequently, we ended up being completely dependent on our engines to get there. For me as skipper and instructor, fuel management became the main preoccupation. Fortunately, we had a fuel gauge on board that proved to be surprisingly accurate, as well as 150 liters of fuel in jerry cans to supplement the 400 liters in the fuel tank. By careful monitoring, we determined that motoring on one engine rather than two gave us almost as much speed at much lower

Approaching the Straits of Gibraltar.



consumption. In the end, we only had to use a third of the 150 liters we had in jerry cans. We were confident enough once we were within 100 miles of Madeira that we reverted to running two engines.

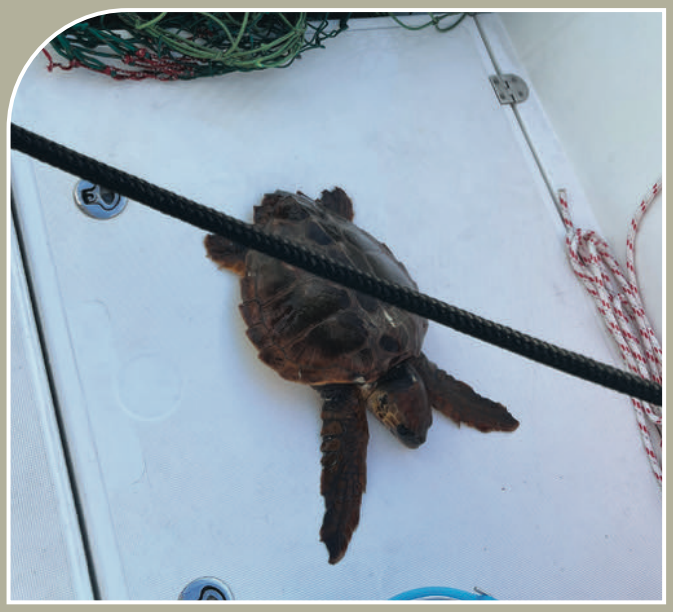
The second noteworthy event started at about 0500 on the morning we expected to arrive in Madeira, when I heard the port engine stop. I got up to join Monica who was on watch. The engine started OK, but stalled as soon as it was put into gear. Clearly something had gotten wrapped around the prop. We decided to continue on the starboard engine until it was light enough to see what was going on.

In the morning light, it was clear that there was something dragging behind the port pontoon. We stopped both engines and leaned over the aft platform to discover that we had snagged a massive amount of fishing net. Furthermore, there was a large sea turtle trapped in the net. We cut the strands that trapped the turtle, which was clearly exhausted. She floated there for some minutes, breathing heavily, and finally swam off.

Then there was no choice but to go over the side with a mask, snorkel and knife, attached to the boat with a safety line, to cut the net off the prop. Each strand had to be cut individually, and there were hundreds of them. Shortly into this job I discovered that there was a second, smaller turtle trapped in the net. Cutting her free, it became clear that she was in worse shape than the first. We brought her on board to try to recover, keeping her doused with water, but she later died after a few hours. I think she was trapped under the boat for too long, without the oxygen reserves that the larger turtle had.

Finally, after about 40 minutes in the water, the prop was free. We hoisted the net on board for disposal in Madeira. We didn't want anyone else to encounter it. At about 2 cubic meters, the pile of netting completely filled the area over the stern swim platform. This incident reinforced our awareness that the sea is far too often used as a dumping ground, presenting hazards to sea life and mariners alike.

We arrived off Funchal just before dusk on November 13, and anchored in the harbor close to the marina entrance. We had been informed in advance that there might not be room for us in the Funchal Marina, and that proved to be the case. Fortunately, the calm conditions made our otherwise exposed anchorage perfectly safe. We raised a glass of bubbly purchased in Mallorca to celebrate a successful arrival, while also looking forward to exploring Madeira, a crew change and getting ready for Leg 3, crossing the Atlantic to the Caribbean. Stay tuned for this account in a future edition.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A sailor since the age of 4, Rob McLean (http://robmclean.ca/sailingresume.html) enjoyed a career as an accountant and international management consultant before becoming a cruising instructor in 2015. He acquired his first cruising boat in the 1980s, and has accumulated more than 35,000 miles since then, 15,000 of these being offshore. Rob is the only person certified by both ASA and Sail Canada as an Offshore instructor, and is both a Sail Canada Senior Instructor Evaluator and ASA Master Instructor, as well as the co-founder of the leading source of online sailing education in Canada, LearnToCruiseOnline.ca. He is the lead instructor for Barefoot Offshore Sailing School, the largest and most active sailing school in the southern Caribbean, and sister company to Barefoot Yacht Charters in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Rob is leading another sailing adventure from Croatia to St. Vincent in the fall of 2023.